

122nd Annual Council of the Diocese of Southern Virginia, 2014
Sermon given by the Rt. Rev. Herman Hollerith, IV

In Talbot Hall, on the wall of the bishop's study, above the couch, hangs a framed print. It's very large – perhaps 3 feet wide by 4 feet long. The print is not mine. It was already in the office when I arrived. No one in the office knows how long it's been hanging there, but I have a vague recollection of seeing it years ago when, as a young priest, I had occasion to visit Charles Vache.

When I sit at my desk and look up across the room, the print is the first thing I see. It is a dramatic rendering of a quite famous religious event in Virginia's early history: *The Baptism of Pocahontas*. Apparently, the original painting, which now resides in the U.S. Capitol, was the work of the artist, John Chapman, and was done in the 1840's.

It's funny how one can look at something over and over again and not really see it. But, a few weeks ago, I suddenly began to notice the details. Composed in a romantic, Renaissance style, the print's focal point is formed by three figures – Pocahontas, John Rolfe and a clergyman. All three are bathed in divine light. Pocahontas is dressed in a white, European-style dress and frankly looks more like Penelope Cruz than an authentic Virginia native. Yet, no matter, because as she kneels reverently before the font, it appears that she is becoming a kind of "New World" anglicized Virgin Mary.

Also of note are the characters on either side of the central image. On the *right* side nearest the exit are two or three Virginia Indians partially clad in buck skins and feathers. The males in particular seem rather disinterested – even perhaps disdainful of the whole affair. In contrast, on the *left* side of the painting, within the inner sanctum of the church, are the faces of the colonial establishment looking down on Pocahontas with marked pleasure and approval – for she is becoming one of them. And just in front on *their* side of the church, on a table, sits a lamp – perhaps symbolizing the light of reason and civility.



The print raises several issues, not the least of which is the mistreatment of indigenous people. But, setting that aside for a moment, what I find so interesting is the artist's understanding of the *mission* of the Church. The entire thrust of the print suggests a kind of inward missionary movement. The Church, it seems, is the place that rescues the unbeliever from the wilderness of idolatry and moves him or her inward toward the redemption of divine rationality. In short, to be baptized is to be civilized, to be made fit for "English" society. Isn't it interesting that such an image should be found in the bishop's office?!?

For several days I wondered about that print. Even though I knew it was from a by-gone era and people had a different theology back then, I had a nagging suspicion that perhaps the apples have not really fallen all that far from the tree. And that maybe, just maybe, *our* understanding of the Church in Southern Virginia is more influenced by Chapman's rendering than we realize. After all, the actual baptism of Pocahontas happened less than 6 miles from where we are sitting at this very moment.

As luck would have it – or perhaps the Holy Spirit would have it – today's reading from Acts also presents us with a picture of the Church in operation. It too involves a conversion and a baptism.

Peter has received word that a Centurion, a high ranking Roman officer, seeks an audience with him to discuss a religious matter. While the request sounds simple, it is fraught with problems. First, Peter is down in Joppa and Cornelius is up in the Roman political stronghold called Caesarea. The two places are many miles apart. It's like saying that Peter is in Accomack and the Centurion is up in Washington D.C. As everyone knows – there's no easy way to get from Accomack to D.C. And, as any Accomackian will ask you, "Why in heavens name would you ever want to leave here and go there anyway?!" Caesarea was the local seat of power of the occupying force. It was dangerous to go there – especially for the leader of a new religious movement. The reasonable thing would have been to send word back inviting Cornelius to Joppa – where Peter could meet him safely on home turf.

And, there's a second problem: Cornelius is a gentile. Jews were forbidden to interact with gentiles. To visit with Cornelius would be for Peter a violation of the spiritual law – not to mention bad social form.

So, Peter has every reason *not* to visit Cornelius... except for one thing, except for the fact that Peter has had a dream, a very strange dream indeed. And that confounded dream suggests that God might just have a new plan for the Church.

Eventually Peter makes his way to Caesarea and arrives at the home of Cornelius. Right way he finds that what he thought would be a private little pastoral conversation is far more complicated. Not only is Cornelius there to greet him, but apparently, also an entire household of folks – brothers, sisters, cousins, in-laws, servants. It looks like a

Mecklenburg County homecoming! And every one of them – all unclean gentiles – have had some sort of religious experience that they’re burning to talk about.

In response to this unexpected turn of events, Peter finally gathers himself and makes a speech: “Folks, you yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew like me to be speaking to you gentiles today....” You can see the disappointment appear in their eyes..., “*but...*” he says, “*God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean*”.

I think it’s fair to say that that was a pretty important “*but...*” in the life of the church! “*But...*”, as Barbra Brown Taylor suggests, is the word on which the whole Gospel swings (“I once was lost, *but* now I’m found”) because, “It means things can change.”!*

And indeed, things did change. That very day, Peter baptized all of Cornelius’ household, and the gentile church was born.

Clearly, Cornelius conversion is a story about the inclusive nature of the Christian faith. But, notice something else too, notice the model it presents of the Church. And notice how different that model is from the one seen in the “Baptism of Pocahontas”.

First, the story is not about an institutionalized Church pulling anyone *inward* toward some sanctified center, but about a disciple stepping *outward* into the world. Cornelius doesn’t travel to see Peter, but Peter against all that is reasonable goes to see Cornelius. And Peter doesn’t offer hospitality. Rather, *Peter* is the one who seeks hospitality – he’s the vulnerable outsider. What does this say about the way we have reduced the ministry of evangelism to a ministry of parish, “pot luck” suppers?

But what I find particularly fascinating is what the story suggests about *conversion*. Peter doesn’t actually convert anyone to anything – not really. According to Acts, Cornelius and his clan have already found God before Peter even gets there. They have a faith that they are living day to day. All Peter does is offer them a new context for understanding their faith. He tells them about Jesus. He offers them the sacrament of Baptism. The Holy Spirit does all the rest.

Brothers and sisters, here’s what I’m getting at: this wonderful story from Acts isn’t so much about the conversion of a Roman Centurion and his family. It’s far more than that. More importantly, it’s a story about *the conversion of a disciple named Peter – about a follower of Christ – a leader of the Church – being converted from an old way of thinking to a new, fresh understanding of the mission of the Church in the world!* My friends, I believe the Holy Spirit is attempting to convey the same message to us here in Southern Virginia: that successful mission *first* must be about *our* conversion before it can be about anyone else’s.

The context for Peter’s dream is noteworthy. Stephen has just been stoned to death in the market place. The Jewish faith has, by-in-large, rejected Jesus as Messiah. The new

Church is in survival mode most of the time. The way is not all that easy, or joyous, or even clear. Failure and rejection are common experiences for Peter and the others. Doors close! And yet, the people of God are resilient enough to adapt and change and to move forward in faith.

In his book, *Let Your Life Speak*, the author Parker Palmer recalls a time when he was unable to discern the direction his life should take. Frustrated he went to see a wise leader of a Quaker community named Ruth for spiritual consultation. Palmer said to her, "...people keep telling me that 'way' will open...but I sit and I pray and I listen...but way is not opening." He said, "I don't have the foggiest idea what I'm supposed to do. 'Way' may open for other people, but its sure not opening for me".

Ruth thought for a moment and said to him, "...In sixty-plus years of living, way has never opened in front of me. But, a lot of way has closed behind me and that's had the same guiding effect."**

I believe that mature faith involves the willingness to do deep discernment around "way closing behind me". What are the expectations that we in our parishes must relinquish in order to move forward? What treasured, yet worn out aspects of church life in Southern Virginia must we let go of in order to discover fresh expressions of the Gospel? The sure sign of a stuck institution is one that just re-cycles the same old patterns of behavior *and* one that finds it more convenient and more comfortable to blame the culture than to adapt to the changing context in which it is living.

A few weeks ago PBS did a special on white-tail deer in America. Did any of you see it? It was a very well-done exposé on the ability of deer to co-exist with human society and to adapt. Seeing the show reminded me of something I once read about deer. In the mid-1800s there were 65,000 deer estimated to be living in the State of Pennsylvania. Now, there are well over 1.5 million deer roaming that same state. Given how the human population has grown in the last 150 years in Pennsylvania and given that humans are the primary predators of deer, the facts speak to the species remarkable ability to survive.



What would it be like if we Christians could be more like white-tailed deer?! What would it be like if we could learn how to multiply through adaptation – even in the face of dwindling habitat? And most importantly, just like deer, do it while still remaining wild and undomesticated? And what would it be like to be more fleet-footed, to walk with a lighter footprint through the culture, and not be so burdened by the baggage of our institutional past? Some church things work just as they did a generation ago, just as they've always worked. And some things that worked a generation ago are not working now. Are we committed to discerning the difference? Are we committed to undergoing the kind of adaptive change that modern discipleship demands? Do we have the courage to leave the safety of Joppa for the uncertainty of Caesarea? And do we believe the promise of the Gospel that wherever we go in the name of Jesus, God is certain to be there teaching us how to adapt?

My brothers and sisters in Christ, “The Baptism of Pocahontas” is a print of our historical past, and it’s part of who we are as the Episcopal Church in Southern Virginia. It is a narrative that lies deep in our roots. There is much about that narrative that we can certainly be proud of. There is equally much that we might regret.

But, today, we are reminded of a different narrative from our past – one that lies even deeper in our roots as Christian people. I believe that the story of Peter and Cornelius is a snapshot of the future Church that we have yet to fully realize – or that we are just beginning to realize. Like most new dreams it is not so easy for us to see at first, the vision of it breaks down the sacred wall of our security. Like Peter we feel unsettled. But as it was for Peter, if we can stay with the dream, remain open to the dream, risk being converted by the dream, we will find what he found – that through Jesus, God is always doing something with his Church that is new and wonderful and totally adventurous.

Allow me to add a postscript: It just so happens that the very day I took notice of the Chapman print, I had occasion to see another print which also spoke of the mission of the Church. I had gone to pay a pastoral call on one of our priests and noticed on his office wall a startling photo of the interior of what appeared to be a large gothic church. But, it was way more than that. By some magic of photography an artist had managed to superimpose the interior of the church onto a cityscape!

The trick had been done so seamlessly that it was almost impossible to tell where the church began and the city left off. For instance the pews were laid out like city blocks and were filled with building fronts. The center aisle was actually not an aisle at all but a busy street which terminated at the high altar. And the perspective was such that the people and the traffic appeared to be moving toward and then away from the altar - as if the altar was some great island in a sea of human activity. It was a very effective and dramatic illusion. As I looked at the image, I realized that while it was set in a cityscape, the photographer could have easily done the same trick with the main street of a small town or a strip mall or a suburban neighbor. The point would have been the same.

That evening as I was driving home I thought about that second print. I thought, "I wonder if I can get one just like it for *my* office?"



Scott Mutter's "Untitled (Church Aisle)"

* Barbara Brown Taylor, Bread of Angels, pg.78.

** Parker J. Palmer, Let Your Life Speak, pg. 38.